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CELEBRATING THE POWER OF TOLERANCE AND SOCIAL HARMONY

**By
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U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh**

On November 16, the world community will observe the 19th United Nations International Day for Tolerance. This day highlights the vital contribution of tolerance toward building and sustaining peaceful, harmonious communities that thrive from diversity of thought, religion, and ethnicity.

As I crisscrossed Bangladesh in my quest to visit all 64 districts, I experienced firsthand the rich mosaic that is Bangladesh—a mosaic of different ethnicities, religions and cultures, a mosaic that reflects the beauty and majesty of wonderful Bangladesh. I was deeply touched everywhere I went by the strong Bangladeshi tradition of different religious groups living side-by-side in peace and harmony with respect for religious differences. I saw the beautiful diversity of the traditions of the great religions of Bangladesh: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. I saw this diversity, too, in the tapestry of ethnic groups—Garos, Manipuri, Tripura, Chakmas, Khashis and others—who have lived in harmony with the Bengali majority for hundreds of years and who continue to live side-by-side in friendship to this very day.

I believe this powerful tradition of social harmony is one of Bangladesh's greatest strengths. This is why it is so jarring when a minority community suffers an attack. Such attacks do not reflect the Bangladeshi tradition and spirit of tolerance; such attacks are aberrations often driven by motivated interests who sow discord as they seek to reap financial or other profit by taking advantage of the vulnerable. I support Bangladeshi citizens and their leaders as they speak out against intolerance and hold accountable those who commit violent acts.

Bangladesh is not alone in confronting these challenges. As the world has recently witnessed in the racial confrontations in Missouri, America, too, is dealing with intolerance.

Elsewhere around the world, other communities are struggling with the violence of war, blatant disregard for human rights, outright injustice, discrimination, and marginalization. These problems are largely born of fear and intolerance, and work to break down communities, families, and individuals, affecting the overall well-being of society. This day speaks to the importance of tolerance and acceptance in achieving important public health objectives,

especially for those living on the margins. I believe there can be no social progress without tolerance; where intolerance thrives, all suffer.

Social inclusion and tolerance ensure equal opportunity for all, regardless of background or beliefs, and enable full and active participation of every member of the society in all aspects of life. Tolerance is the foundation for peace, and it requires treating everyone—even those who are different or who hold different ideas—with dignity and respect. It means respecting and embracing differences to strengthen the nation to the benefit of all.

I believe that America, Bangladesh and all peace-loving countries of the world can work together to combat intolerance, to promote tolerance.

Working together, we can germinate the seeds of tolerance by engaging men, women and children of all backgrounds and beliefs, by engaging all elements of society: government, schools, NGOs, private sector, media, and others. Collective action can make a difference. By understanding the causes of violent intolerance, we can combat it; we can reduce it. A free media can play an important role in exposing the causes and perpetrators of intolerance.

I applaud efforts such as the "Stop Violence, Build a Peaceful Nation" campaign launched by UNDP and 15 NGOs on October 2—the United Nations International Day of Non-Violence—to generate greater public awareness of and support for Bangladesh's traditional values of social harmony and tolerance. Initiatives such as this promote public discourse on the importance of tolerance and the need to preserve this proud Bangladeshi tradition.

On this International Day for Tolerance, we here in Bangladesh and citizens around the world should reaffirm the right of all persons to live free of discrimination and marginalization. Closer to home, we should recommit ourselves to supporting all Bangladeshis as they build on their traditional values and aspirations to construct better futures for themselves and their children. Let us together recognize and celebrate the great Bangladeshi traditions of tolerance, peace, and social harmony.

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